View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons

Naval War College Review

Volume 34
Number 6 *November-December*

Article 6

1981

Superpower Arms Control and the NATO Allies: A Question of Interests

Bruce L. Valley
U.S. Navy

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review

Recommended Citation

Valley, Bruce L. (1981) "Superpower Arms Control and the NATO Allies: A Question of Interests," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 34 : No. 6 , Article 6.
Available at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol34/iss6/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

With the emergence of the nuclear era and a balance of terror, the value that nations have previously associated with alliance participation has lessened. A rise in nationalism has highlighted the close association between national prestige and the possession of nuclear arms. The net effect appears to be a consistently weaker bargaining position with the Soviets.

SUPERPOWER ARMS CONTROL AND THE NATO ALLIES: A QUESTION OF INTERESTS

by

Commander Bruce L. Valley, U.S. Navy

The two elements of this discussion are alliances and arms control. Neither concept is new. Throughout history, nations and other identifiable groups have often felt the need or desire to enter into agreements for collective defense. The lengthy struggle between Athens, Sparta, and their respective allies in ancient Greece, as aptly described by Thucydides, provides one of history's best examples of the costs and benefits of alliance membership. Likewise ancient are the attempts of men to turn their talents and resources from the accumulation of arms to more productive endeavors. Isaiah's words come to us across the years: "And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."[1] In 546 B.C., nearly a century of savage wars was successfully ended with a 14-state conference in Honan, China on the cessation of armaments. The liberal tradition reflects similar aspirations and efforts in both of these areas. Why? Because, almost uniquely among the multiplicity of tools and instruments available to nation states, alliances and arms control agreements both provide the potential means of maintaining both security and peace without paying history's usual premium of treasure and blood.

Why then, one might ask, are the events of history so obviously replete with the failures of alliances and arms control, rather than their successes? The answers lie perhaps in the nature of man, both individual and collective, and in his propensity for continued hope. Although attempts to limit armies and armaments, and to forge successful and enduring alliances, have been a continuous thread in the fabric of history's political thought, frequent failure has often created a sense of disillusionment. Such goals, while desirable, become viewed as unrealistic. Fear, suspicion, and long memories of bitter experience

Published by U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons, 1981

can gradually erode a national search for such evanescent and ideal solutions. The accumulation and use of arms, rather than their limitation or reduction, have been the dominant theme of history. And so it is today.

Since World War II history has seen perhaps its best and most complex example of these two concepts, alliances and arms control, in the continuing superpower confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, and between their respective alliances, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact. This essay will focus on the role, the perspectives, and the involvement of the NATO allies in Europe and on this process. What it will discuss, ultimately, are the perceptions, interests, and security needs of these nations.

While it is generally accepted that arms control negotiations between the two superpowers are essentially if not completely bilateral, it may be argued that this is far less true for the United States than for the U.S.S.R. The United States, owing to such diverse factors as historical precedent, its open society, economics and trade, security needs, and its sphere of influence and self-mandated role as leader of free nations, must temper its positions and agreements to consider the needs and desires of its NATO allies, primarily the Federal Republic of Germany, Great Britain, France, and Italy. Such considerations, which often attempt to balance mutually exclusive demands or perceived needs by various nations, can have a net effect of diffusing both the strength and clarity of the U.S. negotiating position. The result, as may be expected in any struggle between monolith and committee, predictably tends to favor the stronger voice of unity. As an example: the U.S. decision to station Pershing II missiles in Europe required long, difficult negotiations accompanied by public dialogue and debate, positions and issues undoubtedly "overheard" to advantage by the ultimate negotiating opponent, the U.S.S.R. For the U.S.S.R., a similar stationing of SS-20 missiles in Pact satellites was probably a matter of fiat and, in any case, none of the pertinent discussions nor the very fact that such a deployment had taken place would necessarily be public information. Later, such disparate negotiating factors might play significantly in the formulation of a superpower arms limitation agreement regarding these weapons systems—to the potential disadvantage of the United States.

"Some people have said that the history of disarmament in the past twenty-five years has been a sorry record of failure in light of the needs; others have said that it was a splendid record of achievement in light of the obstacles. It is probable that both are right."[2] Needs and obstacles. Herein lies the nexus of NATO Europe's anxiety . . . and the frustrating problems faced by the United States.

The roots of present problems in European arms control and security may well lie in the events of World War II and in the policies—or possibly the failure to implement the policies—adopted by the victorious Allies for resuscitating stricken Europe in the postwar period. Those farther sighted might suggest the roots lie much earlier in European history, in the periods of grand coalitions and balance-of-power politics.

When the fighting ended in Europe in 1945 the Soviet and Western Allied armies had blanketed Europe, the former moving from the north and east, the latter from French and Italian beaches. North of the Alps, the two armed masses met approximately along the line of the Elbe River in central Germany. There they have remained, confronting each other across central Europe ever since. The deep penetration by the Soviet Army into central Europe, and the subjugation of the countries of

Eastern Germany, Poland, Hungary, and later Czechoslovakia, thus became and remain a major factor, complicating efforts to attain conrinental security and arms control in Europe. Additionally, the handling (or mishandling) of defeated Germany by the allies, the question of division versus reunification, and of the need to prevent Germany from becoming a future threat to *both* West and East—all questions arguably at the absolute center of all larger concerns regarding European alliances, arms control, and security—remain high on the list of factors that, actively or implicitly, influence the United States in superpower arms negotiations. As Henry Kissinger said, "We [the United States] seem to be prisoners of circumstances."[3]

And this is but one of a host of uncomfortable factors. Professor Ronald Steel, in discussing the effect of technology on alliances, states that "the revolution in military technology, by undermining the need for military alliances, has also made them seem extremely perilous commitments. Since helping a friend now involves the likelihood of national suicide, nations are driven to protect themselves as best they can."[4] Central to this technological advance are the effects of nuclear weapons ownership among some, but not all, alliance members.

In the prenuclear era, alliances were regarded as one means by which a nation could increase its national power, and thereby strengthen security and deter potential aggressors. Another advantage of alliance participation was that it could commit other nations to act in defense of a besieged member state. The relative costs of war, therefore, became lower and the security advantages sufficiently high that alliance commitments involving the active military defense of an ally would usually be honored. Typical practice was to effect a gradual involvement, applying power in increments until a solution was derived.

With the emergence of the nuclear era and a "balance of terror,"[5] the value that nations associated with alliance participation lessened. Nations felt less secure and less able to control their destinies. The rise in nationalism among all nations throughout the last decade highlighted the close association between national prestige and the possession of nuclear arms. The shades of inequality among allies possessing or not possessing such weapons sharply widened. At the same time, this possession has provided special status. Britain, clearly no longer a superpower, enjoys a considerable advantage in prestige because of her nuclear forces as compared to Italy, who is admired and respected but often ignored when vital political decisions are made.

Advantages of alliance participation seem to have acquired an elusive, even obscure, quality. An impression of greater self-sufficiency exists among the nuclear group based largely on the presumed military utility of nuclear weapons. Among these nations the sense of military inadequacy that once prompted nations to join alliances has become considerably less strong. To a significant extent the perception of the threat having been somewhat counterbalanced by nuclear capability has served to lessen the insecurity and hence the cohesion among allies.

Today in NATO the nagging feeling persists among the European allies that despite the alliance, or perhaps because of it, national security continues to be threatened. Two important questions derive. First, in the event of a military crisis would the United States come to the defense of Europe? Second, assuming that the United States did come to the defense of Europe, could Europe survive the ensuing war? As conventional military balance has tilted obviously to the U.S.S.R., and the nuclear balance has gradually followed a similar trend, European leaders have wondered with increasing frequency

whether there is any real advantage to be gained through a military alliance with the United States. In some cases they have gone still further, taking initial steps toward accommodation with the Soviets, having judged the multilateral approach clearly less promising than the bilateral.

Added to this are political and economic pressures felt throughout NATO, including the United States, to reduce the number of troops committed to NATO. While an increasingly unfavorable military balance and continuing Soviet qualitative improvements argue against this, the United States has in the past artempted to compensate for troop reductions with the introduction of or the increase in numbers of low-yield battlefield nuclear weapons. In commenting on rhis trend one senior NATO military official opined that "you can't provide and adequate defense against an adversary who possesses a big edge in potential manpower with weapons alone."[6] Many share that view. As conventional capabiliries decrease and reliance on nuclear capabilities increases, flexibility of response options declines. Such a trend ultimately musr suggesr that no feasible military alternative exists to rapid escalation into nuclear war if aggression against Wesrern Europe should occur. Thus some European officials believe that the American disposition to defend Europe—and thereby incur a heightened probability of an attack against the Unired States itself—has been seriously compromised. Sir Alec Douglas-Home, British Foreign Secretary, expressed his doubts about U.S. strategic reliability to the House of Lords in *1963*, "It is assumed that the Unired States would always, in all circumstances, cover Great Britain with her strategic deterrent. I profoundly hope this is true. But it is a large assumption and governments cannot take risks with their national security."[7] Such sentiments and questions seemed (and seem) odd when we recall that it was largely the American guarantee of a nuclear defense ro the Europeans that initially drew those nations into the NATO alliance.

This qualified or questioned disposition to defend allies in the nuclear era suggests even deeper problems concerning alliance cohesion under conditions of actual attack. The underlying prenuclear alliance concept of an attack against one being viewed as an artack against all generally meant posrattack cohesion and unified resistance. In the nuclear era, however, an attack against one might be the signal for the immediate and complete abandonment of alliance ties. Precedent is totally lacking. This potential for unpredictable postattack behavior is yet another reason for nations to deem alliances incapable of strengthening their security.

Finally, in the nuclear age when national survival is on rhe line, there may well be extreme pressures that cause a nation to act first and consult later. In some cases reaction time may be so limited that there will simply be insufficient rime to seek consultation. Also consultation usually involves compromise, an unaffordable luxury with national existence at stake.

These, then, have been some of the factors that prevent the desired confluence of opinion and unity between the United States and her European allies. They appear obviously in the anxieries, the behavior, and the politics of the Europeans; less obviously, yet perhaps more pervasively, in the arms control efforts of the United States *vis-à-vis* the U.S.S.R. It has been said that nations do not have permanent allies, only permanent interests—the western European narions offer an excellent example of why this is so: dependent partners of the soon-to-be lesser power in a continuing nations superpower confrontarion, neighbors of a swelling imperialistic idealogue, the odds seem against them. Their times as Great Powers, as holders of colonial empires, or great armies and

navies, even great statesmen, seem past. Little wonder their paranoia.

In the face of such a predicament, their positions seem more understandable. They participate in MBFR because it is politically palatable to do so, yet they are not sincere about troop reductions; indeed there is scarcely any way that such reductions would not be inimical to their interests. They support, some of them, expanded U.S. missilery on their soil, but only if several participate to broaden and share the risk—almost a disclaimer in itself of the collective risk-sharing reason for the alliance. They support SALT as a concept but scrutinize carefully those prospective conditions that undermine their positions, such as a limitation on technology transfer. They are becoming more outspoken concerning matters that affect their security interests and they refuse to accept U.S. arms control policies that conflict with those interests. All of this behavior is both logical and understandable in light of their circumstances.

The net effect on the United States, however, will almost certainly be a consistently weaker bargaining position with the Soviets. Lacking alliance agreement and unity, the United States may be forced increasingly to go it alone. As allies seek their own eastern accommodation and judge themselves insecure, regardless of what the U.S. response to a Soviet attack in Europe might be, the Soviet goal of breaking the Atlantic bridge may become feasible. It might even become fact. Certainly the Europeans will remain dependent to some extent on the United States, but in the face of the atrophy of American arms and decline of U.S. industrial status—not to mention the immense worldwide loss of prestige suffered by the United States for its intransigent isolation and confusion after Vietnam—it becomes a matter of degree. Today it is the trend that is being watched, and with trepidation. Though very recent events show some promise, promise all too often in the past has been proven empty.

All of these interalliance problems occur at a difficult time. It would appear that the Soviets, having failed now for a considerable period to reciprocate unilateral U.S. initiatives toward strategic restraint (B-1, MX, neutron bomb), have decided that traditional arms control objectives (balance, stability, deterrence, reduced tension) are inappropriate for the Soviet Union, both now and for some years ahead. They have appeared also to reject the central arms control notion that technical or political problems created by inadvertent instabilities in both strategic and local military balances should be managed cooperatively, not competitively.

"We are moving into a much less stable, much more dangerous world, in which the objectives of arms control are going to be more important but less easy to reach."[8] It is vitally important that the role of the European NATO allies, in supporting both alliance goals and the increasingly difficult position of the United States, be a strong, united, and positive factor. It is unfortunate that it will likely not be so.

Postscript. The role of NATO's European allies on superpower arms control, and on the United States in particular, is neither anarchronistic nor arcane. This may best be seen in some selected quotations by Deputy Secretary of Defense Frank C. Carlucci, extracted from a speech given on 21 February 1981 at the annual Wehekunde military policy conference in Munich, West Germany:

- The (Soviets) steady and cumulative expansion . . . has been accompanied by a long-term and major shift in the strategic nuclear balance. The twin results of this shift are that the United States no longer enjoys a strategic edge to compensate for other deficiencies.

On all levels of military capability, the trends are ominous.

- Neither we Americans nor Europeans have been sufficiently engaged in the search for ways to protect our common interests.
- All too often in the past we have talked of consultation and acted on our own.
- Europe is no longer shattered, impoverished, and disunited. Indeed, Western Europe's total GNP exceeds that of the United States. In this situation the United States cannot be expected to improve and strengthen U.S. forces in Europe unless other allies increase their contribution to the combined defense effort. Nor can the United States, unaided, bear the burden of promoting Western interests beyond Europe.
- We intend to demonstrate a realistic approach to arms control, to ensure that arms control will serve our security needs and that our approach to negotiation is guided by a realistic strategy.
- The harsh realities confronting us, however, dictate even greater efforts by all in the future. There is a critical need to strengthen the conventional force structure in Europe. This requires substantial additional resources, rather than more rhetoric and disputes about percentages.
- Western Europe's stake in the security and stability of the Persian Gulf is enormous and well-recognized. What is perhaps less well understood is the great contribution the Western European members of the alliance could make to help protect the security of this region so vital to them.
- We want to be able to say that a new awareness has arisen in the alliance, a new consensus to give first priority to the defense of freedom.

To this Carlucci speech, Hans Apel, Defense Minister of West Germany, replied, "West Germany pledges today that it will shoulder its share of any extra military commitments decided upon by NATO . . . ."

From both sides of the Atlantic . . . form or substance?

And thus, straining toward tomorrow, we strive stubbornly to survive today . . . "time and circumstances permitting."

Caveat: As students of modern arms control, we tend to view Soviet weapons policies of all types as singular, autonomous, and monolithic. We assume that only direct Soviet interests are considered, that satellite "allies" have no voice. In contrast, while disturbing, convoluted, and perhaps inefficient, the widening role of the NATO European allies in U.S. positions on arms and arms control is not only understandable. It is also reassuring.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

CDR Bruce L. Valley, USN, serves as Special Assistant and speechwriter to the Secretary of the Navy. A naval aviator, he graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy, U.S. Naval Test Pilot School, Naval Postgraduate School, and the Naval War College with highest distinction in 1981. He also completed advanced studies in National Security Management at ICAF in 1977. He is a member of the Society of Experimental Test Pilots and Mensa. He has recently published "The Armed Forces of Turkey" with Adm. H.E. Shear in the 1980 Royal United Services Institute's *Brassey Defence Handbook*, and "Rebirth of U.S. Naval Strategy" with Secretary of the Navy Lehman in the U.S.S.I. *Strategic Review*, Summer 1981.

NOTES

1. The Bible, Isaiah, 2:4.
2. William Epstein, *Disarmament: Twenty-five Years of Effort* (Toronto: Canadian Institute of International Affairs, 1971), p. 39.
3. Henry A. Kissinger, "The Viet Nam Negotiations," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1969, p. 200.
4. Ronald Steel, *The End of Alliance and the Future of Europe* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), p. 40.
5. Henry T. Nash, *Nuclear Weapons and International Behavior* (Leyden, The Netherlands: Sijthoff, 1975), p. 37.
6. John Newhouse, *U.S. Troops in Europe* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1971), p. 68.
7. Sir Alec Douglas-Home, Debate in the House of Lords, 11-14 March 1963.
8. Robert Ranger, *Arms and Politics, 1958-1978* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1979), p. 222.